

Infallibility and Inerrancy in the Canadian and American Reformed Churches

Jitse M. van der Meer

1. Introduction

In 2009 Rev. Wes Bredenhof published six articles about inerrancy.¹ In the first two he offered a definition of inerrancy and a very brief sketch of its history. The remaining articles detailed developments in the Christian Reformed Church and in the Synodical churches in The Netherlands. He wrote the articles in order to address the concern and “uneasiness” felt by some members of our churches about the use of the term ‘inerrancy’ in the Introduction to the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) for the Canadian Reformed and the United Reformed churches. It states: “We Reformed believers maintain that the standard for personal, public and ecclesiastical life is God’s Word, the inspired, infallible and inerrant book of Scripture.” According to Bredenhof, “Some have claimed that the Canadian Reformed Churches, while holding to infallibility, do not officially hold to a doctrine of inerrancy. They say that biblical inerrancy is not found in our confessions. Consequently, the Introduction to the PJCO seems to be introducing extra-confessional binding. Through the PJCO, the Canadian Reformed Churches will be committed to inerrancy, whereas we never have been before.” Rev. Bredenhof suggests that this uneasiness about inerrancy seems to be motivated “by a latitudinarian impulse that wants to make or maintain room for certain controversial views.” However, he did not evaluate the notion of inerrancy in the broader context of ecclesiastical developments in North America in the last half century. This is unfortunate because in those developments we find the source of the unease which is not the one surmised by Rev. Bredenhof. In this essay I will identify the reason for this discomfort.

2. Original meaning of inerrancy

The proposed joint church order as well as Rev. Bredenhof use the terms inerrancy and infallibility as synonyms and indeed they used to have the same meaning. Since the establishment of the canon, the Bible has been accepted as the Word of God and because God is perfect and holy, the Bible has for the most part implicitly been treated as infallible or inerrant, that is, truthful.

The notion of inerrancy implies a standard of truth as well as an intention to declare this truth. Throughout its history and continuing today the Scriptural understanding of infallibility or inerrancy of Scripture has been that Scripture is true and trustworthy because its Author is true and trustworthy. I will refer to this understanding of inerrancy as ‘original inerrancy.’ Further, truth is always about something. Original inerrancy was understood to be not only about ‘faith and morals,’ such as the doctrine of the Trinity and the command to love your neighbour as yourself. Inerrancy also included ‘nature and history,’ but in a sense qualified by the immediate and wider context of Scripture, not in the sense of modern scholarship. The divine author aimed at being understood by peoples from all places and times, not to satisfy the standards of modern scholarship which would have made that impossible. For example, Jesus characterized the mustard

¹Bredenhof, W. “Inerrancy – Lessons from History,” (Part 1 of 6), *Clarion*, February 26, 2010, vol. 59, no. 5, pp. 114f.; Part 2, March 12, no. 6, pp. 142f.; Part 3, March 26, no. 7, pp. 173f.; Part 4, April 9, no. 8, pp. 202f.; Part 5, May 7, no. 10, pp. 256f.; Part 6, May 21, no. 11, pp. 282-4.

seed as the smallest seed. But the intent of the parable of the mustard seed is to make a true statement about the magnitude of the faith of the audience, not about the size of mustard seed. Even though the mustard seed is not the smallest seed by the standards of modern botany, this statement is not false. Matthew describes how a star guides the Magi to Jesus' birthplace. But the intent of this story is to make a true statement about Jesus, namely that he ought to be revered as a king. To be sure, the star was a real phenomenon in nature. But Matthew did not report it in a way that satisfies modern scientific standards of reporting as shown by the difficulties in identifying the star of Bethlehem astronomically.²

In sum, these and other stories in Scripture are not intended to report facts in a way that satisfies the requirements of scientific and historical scholarship. Rather, they aim to convey messages about faith. That aim colours the way natural phenomena and historical events are included. But it does not make them untrue or unreal. This is what I mean when I say that throughout its career, original inerrancy has not been concerned with scholarly notions of nature and history. But throughout its history there have been attempts to make it so. Modern rationalistic inerrancy – the view that the meaning of the text of Scripture depends upon whether or not it satisfies the demands of some form of scholarship – is the latest attempt in that history.³ This essay focuses on that latest attempt.

3. Shift in meaning of inerrancy

An important shift in the meaning of original inerrancy occurred among North American evangelicals in response to higher biblical criticism and Darwinism. Historian George M. Marsden describes how following the eighteenth-century several developments in North America amplified a rationalistic distortion of inerrancy which had already been latent in seventeenth-century European developments.

One tributary into the river of rationalist inerrantism is Dispensationalism, an ancient movement that saw a revival among European theologians and natural philosophers as early as the seventeenth century. Dispensationalists use Scripture to identify the dispensations (periods) of history and to predict future dispensations the last one which is the Millennium – the thousand year reign – and the return of Christ.⁴ They use the historical-grammatical method of interpretation, popularly referred to as the “literal” interpretation of Scripture. Their interest in identifying the periods of biblical history requires that biblical prophecy be treated as objective data about nature and history. Dispensationalism was introduced to North America by European immigrants.

A second tributary flowing into rationalist inerrantism came from a group of seventeenth-century Dutch protestant theologians among whom Voetius (1589-1676) is the best known one. They were followers of Aristotle in the medieval scholastic tradition. Space prevents me from doing full justice to the complexities of their views of the relationship between the interpretation of Scripture and of nature. For one, they tended to reject the heliocentrism of Copernicus because they were Aristotelian geocentrists. Secondly, they failed to distinguish heliocentrism from the ideas of Rene Descartes (1596-1650) about the origin of the planetary system. Finally, they rejected Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676) and his idea of pre-Adamites. The works of

²Humphreys, Colin. “The Star of Bethlehem,” *Science and Christian Belief*, vol. 5, (October 1995): 83-101.

³The notion of inerrancy has been distorted in a variety of ways. I use the term ‘rationalistic inerrancy’ as a shorthand to cover elements of scientism, objectivism and intellectualism.

⁴The common denominator of the many forms of Millenarianism is that Christ will return at the end of time to gather the believers and to found a kingdom on earth over which he will reign as its king. At the close of this kingdom the saints will enter heaven with Christ, while the wicked, who have also been resuscitated, will be condemned.

Copernicus, Descartes and Lapeyrère were lumped together as the new science that was in conflict with the literal interpretation of Scripture.

Especially since the 18th century, defenders of Christianity from the Aristotelian and millenarian traditions joined forces in defending what they considered the ‘objective truths’ of Scripture. They attempted to show that the truths revealed in Scripture were confirmed by scientific evidence. This was a tacit acknowledgment of their trust in the superiority of scientific knowledge over Scripture. In other words, they replaced the authority of Scripture with that of science. In the 19th century, American apologists continued to base their defence of Scripture on science, emphasizing the objectivity and neutrality of facts both in nature and in Scripture. Many continue to do so today, even though this view of science has long since been corrected. Henry Morris, a founder of the scientific creationist movement, was confident that biblical beliefs would satisfy even his engineer’s habit “of requiring satisfactory evidence and proof of all that they accept as fact.”⁵ This outdated view of scientific knowledge as neutral and objective explains in large part why the rationalistic distortion of classical inerrancy was welcome in North America.

A third tributary into the main stream of modern inerrantism are the twentieth-century scientific creationists. Scientific creationism originated in nineteenth-century Seventh-day Adventism with the Adventist George McCready Price (1870-1963) who was instructed by Ellen G. White (1827-1915). Seventh-day Adventism derives its name from the doctrine that the Sabbath should be observed on the seventh day of the week, specifically, from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. Adventists make common ground with Dispensationalists in that they use the books of Daniel and Revelation to predict the coming of the Millennium. This is part of a broader literalism which was imposed on the symbols used in Daniel and Revelation in efforts to predict the future of God’s plans for the world. These features of Seventh-day Adventism, Dispensationalism and scientific creationism have helped the development of the rationalistic distortion of inerrancy in North America.⁶ Literalists in these traditions reduce the text of the book of Genesis to information about nature and history in the same way as their dispensationalist precursors did with all books of the Bible.

A fourth tributary into the river of rationalist inerrantism are the theologians of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. They hold that the Holy Spirit dictated or suggested the very words of Scripture. As a result, the divine authorship of Scripture came to be emphasized at the cost of its human authorship. The human author and his context disappeared. One third of the members of the steering committee that prepared the organization of the Creation Research Society in 1963 were Missouri Synod Lutherans.⁷

This confluence of tributaries in North America transformed the original notion of inerrancy. During the late nineteenth century, but especially during the twentieth, infallibility or original inerrancy was used in a defence of the authority of Scripture against higher biblical criticism imported from Germany into North America. During this period, B.B. Warfield became the spokesman of original inerrancy. Unfortunately, the onslaught of the rationalism of the Bible critics led to an equally rationalistic distortion of original inerrancy. The distortion was too much for Warfield who distanced himself from it.⁸

⁵Morris, Henry. *That You Might Believe* (Chicago: Good Books, Inc., 1946), 4.

⁶Trimp, Cornelius. “Amerikaans Fundamentalisme,” In: *Woord op Schrift: Theologische Reflecties over het Gezag van de Bijbel*. Eds. C. Trimp, A.L.Th. de Bruijne, J.J.T. Doedens, B. Kamphuis (Kampen: Kok. 2002), 29; Noll, Mark A. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 134.

⁷Marsden, George M. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 161.

⁸Noll, Mark A., Livingstone, David N. eds. *B.B. Warfield. Evolution, Science, and Scripture: Selected Writings* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 16-25.

4. The Chicago Statements

The shift in the meaning of inerrancy just sketched is the context for three twentieth-century declarations about Scripture sponsored by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) and referred to here as the Chicago Statements. The *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978) defines and defends the inerrancy of the Bible against a perceived trend toward liberal views of Scripture. The signatories came from a variety of evangelical Christian denominations, and include James Montgomery Boice, Carl F.H. Henry, Kenneth Kantzer, J.I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, and R. C. Sproul. This was followed in 1982 by the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* in recognition of the fact that “While we recognize that belief in the inerrancy of Scripture is basic to maintaining its authority, the values of that commitment are only as real as one’s understanding of the meaning of Scripture.” This statement is intended to clarify hermeneutical principles and practices. The project was completed in 1986 with the *Chicago Statement of Biblical Application*. Its introduction states that it “is concerned with applying eternal truth to late twentieth-century situations.” Together, these statements define, interpret and apply the doctrine of inerrancy.⁹ The *Chicago Statement of Biblical Application* may be taken as explaining the two preceding statements. Did the Chicago statements avoid the shift into rationalism and restore original inerrancy?¹⁰

I begin with the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978). Article XI reads:

We affirm that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses. We deny that it is possible for the Bible to be at the same time infallible and errant in its assertions. Infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished, but not separated.

On the one hand, this article can be taken as intended to maintain what I refer to as original inerrancy because it does not separate infallibility and inerrancy. On the other hand, the distinction between infallibility and inerrancy in Article XI suggests that they have different meanings, but these are not stated. Moreover, to assert that the Bible is true ‘in all the matters it addresses’ leaves open what matters it addresses. This makes inerrancy vulnerable to abuse of the kind addressed in this article. People read all sorts of ideas into Scripture and then claim these ideas as matters addressed by the Bible. In contrast, the Belgic Confession is clear when it states in Art. 2: “We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein.”¹¹

Art. XII of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978) states:

We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.

This article seems to fill in what was left open in Article XI. But what is meant by Biblical assertions in the fields of history and science? When the Bible makes assertions about nature or history, they have a very different character and purpose than when historians and scientists do so. Ignoring those differences paves the road to conflict. The singling out of creation and flood confirms as much. Taken as referring to original inerrancy, this article is ambiguous at best and problematic at worst.

⁹For background and text of the three Chicago Statements, see the web site of Dallas Theological Seminary: www.library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI.shtml.

¹⁰Geisler, Norman L. Ed. *Inerrancy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980, 493-502.

¹¹The Standing Committee for the Publication of the *Book of Praise* of the Canadian Reformed Churches, *Book of Praise Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Authorized Provisional Version, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2010), 503.

The actual intent of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* was to protect Scripture from higher biblical criticism. A far more effective defence of the inerrancy of Scripture would have been a critique of what drives historical biblical criticism, namely the anti-Christian philosophies of naturalism and historicism. Scholars in these traditions overestimate the powers of scientific and historical scholarship. That is, they abuse the authority of science and history for their anti-Christian agenda. Only when disciplines such as science and history are extended beyond their legitimate capacities and turned into philosophies such as naturalism and historicism can they contradict the teachings of Scripture.

Unfortunately, the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* does not take this approach to defending the truthfulness of Scripture. Instead it sets up Scripture as a competitor with science. For instance, article XII opens the possibility of taking Scripture as an inerrant source of scientific information or as a scientific textbook, as the popular expression goes. Young earth creationists can take it as an endorsement of a world-wide flood that explains all geological features of the earth even though such an interpretation is not mandated by the text. One wishes article XII in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* had been as clear as article XIII on economics in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Application* (1986). Article XIII states:

We deny that Scripture directly teaches any science of economics, although there are principles of economics that can be derived from Scripture.

The meaning of ‘principles’ is made clear: “We affirm that valid economic principles can be found in Scripture and should form an integral part of a Christian world and life view,” with examples provided in additional affirmations. Why was a similar denial not included for the scholarly study of nature and history? Again, the Belgic Confession is clearer when it states in its Art. 2: “We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein.”¹²

Despite the good intent behind the Chicago Statements, the thrust of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* (1982) offers reasons for concern. This can be illustrated, for instance, by comparing Article VI in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* (1982) with Article VIII in the *Chicago Statement on Inerrancy* (1978). Art. VI in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* (1982) states:

We affirm that the Bible expresses God’s truth in propositional statements, and we declare that biblical truth is both objective and absolute. We further affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts. We deny that, while Scripture is able to make us wise unto salvation, biblical truth should be defined in terms of this function. We further deny that error should be defined as that which willfully deceives.

Article VIII in the *Chicago Statement on Inerrancy* (1978) states:

We affirm that God in His Work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared.

The issue is the notion of propositional statement. A propositional statement is an assertion that can be true or false rather than a command that must be obeyed or praise that must be given. Scripture contains many types of language that are not propositional such as commands, promises, proverbs and apocalypse. Scripture also contains statements that can be true or false. As John Frame has observed, to speak of Scripture as ‘propositional revelation’ is misleading because it reduces the text of Scripture to propositional statements. This is the first problem with Article VI in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* (1982). It confirms the concerns about rationalism presented in the previous section.

The second problem with Article VI in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* (1982) is that it appears to contradict Article VIII of the *Chicago Statement on Inerrancy* (1978) because the latter acknowledges that Scripture contains literary styles that are not propositional. Whether this is a true contradiction or whether

¹²The Standing Committee for the Publication of the *Book of Praise*, 503.

the later Article VI was intended to narrow the earlier Article VIII remains unclear. But the reduction of Scripture to propositional statements makes the Statements vulnerable to rationalistic distortions by selectively ignoring that Scripture also contains laws, poetry, songs, parables, questions, praise, exhortations and commands.

This concern about rationalistic distortion of Scripture is not an empty one. One can see the distortion in the way evangelical theologian and apologist Norman L. Geisler treats Article XXII of the *Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics* (1982). This article reads:

We affirm that Genesis 1-11 is factual, as is the rest of the book. We deny that the teachings of Genesis 1-11 are mythical and that scientific hypotheses about earth history or the origin of humanity may be invoked to overthrow what Scripture teaches about creation.

Geisler comments regarding Article XXII:

Since the historicity and the scientific accuracy of the early chapters of the Bible have come under severe attack it is important to apply the “literal” hermeneutic espoused (Article XV) [which explains that “interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text”] to this question. The result was a recognition of the factual nature of the account of the creation of the universe, all living things, the special creation of man, the Fall, and the Flood. These accounts are all factual, that is, they are about space-time events which actually happened as reported in the book of Genesis (see Article XIV). The article left open the question of the age of the earth on which there is no unanimity among evangelicals and which was beyond the purview of this conference. There was, however, complete agreement on denying that Genesis is mythological or unhistorical. Likewise, the use of the term “creation” was meant to exclude the belief in macro-evolution, whether of the atheistic or theistic varieties.¹³

One can appreciate the inclusion of various literary forms in the literal sense. But the reference to the scientific accuracy of the early chapters of the Bible reveals that Geisler is not only reducing those chapters to propositional statements, but also abusing Scripture as teaching science and history in the modern sense of scholarly history. This is confirmed by the blanket rejection of theistic forms of macro-evolution, even though this does not specifically appear in the CSBI, but only in Geisler’s commentary on it.

In conclusion, confusion remains. Statements such as those just reviewed do little more than raising questions such as: What does Scripture teach about the field of history and science? Or: what does the Bible teach about creation and the flood? They have, therefore, been interpreted in different directions. In my view the failure of the Chicago statements to clarify the meaning of inerrancy is due to the approach of fencing the freedom of exegesis by general rules of interpretation. As every exegete will affirm, the particularity of the text demands that each discrepancy be given its own unique approach. This cannot be legislated by general rules, but requires trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But there has been a shift in the meaning of inerrancy away from the use of reason under the guidance of the Holy Spirit towards a style of exegesis and application that places too much trust in reason. This rationalistic inerrantism must be rejected not because it uses reason in exegesis, but because it places too much trust in reason.

5. How has this shift of meaning of inerrancy been evaluated?

According to historian George M. Marsden, modern inerrantists tend to view the Bible as a homogeneous system of logically consistent propositions. Marsden’s diagnosis has been expanded by the Reformed Dutch

¹³Geisler, Norman L. *Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*. Oakland, California: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1983; accessed Apr. 2, 2013 at www.bible-researcher.com/chicago2.html.

theologian Cornelius Trimp, who was a staunch defender of the authority of Scripture.¹⁴ Nevertheless, he saw a conflict between modern inerrancy and infallibility. He rejected modern inerrancy because it requires trust in human reason that reduces the Bible to objective information – the ‘data’ of Scripture – presented with logical precision. Trimp stresses the importance of trust in God and of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit who moves one to accept Scripture as proclamation of God’s gracious promise of salvation.¹⁵ He appears to make no distinction between original inerrancy and its rationalistic distortion, but his point is well-taken. A similar diagnosis has been made independently by the conservative German theologian Gerhard Maier. He sees “a strong inclination toward deductive-rational reasoning” when Norman Geisler writes that “The Bible is as perfect as God is.”¹⁶ Thus, the first objection to modern inerrantism is a philosophical one. Modern inerrantists read the Bible as if it is a collection of logically consistent propositions that satisfy the requirements of discursive reason. They ignore the other contents that Scripture also contains such as laws, promises, liturgies, genealogies, arguments, narratives, meditations, visions, aphorisms, homilies, and parables. This rationalistic form of inerrancy appears to be an attempt to ground the unity of Scripture in human reason rather than in divine authority. But this unity cannot be seen as a logical unity. It must be taken as a unity of meaning originating in the divine author.

Secondly, in rationalistic inerrancy the meaning of the text of Scripture is made to depend not only upon human reason, but also upon whether or not it satisfies the demands of some form of scholarship, usually stemming from after the scientific revolution. This can be made more specific. According to rationalistic inerrantists, truth in Scripture must be empirically verifiable truth – a requirement also applied by higher biblical critics. As for the historical parts of Scripture, the rationalistic inerrantists read them as if the descriptions were meant to satisfy the requirements of modern historical scholarship. Rationalistic inerrantists reject the view that the writers describe what happened historically in ways shaped by their everyday sense of events and their culture. The same attitude is seen toward texts about natural events. Rationalistic inerrantists read Scripture’s descriptions of nature as if they are of the same kind as those of contemporary natural science. If you hold to the inerrancy of Scripture, then it follows that the creation and flood accounts are both historically accurate and scientifically sound. That is, one must believe that creation was made in literally six days and that the flood was a global flood. This, I might add, rationalistic inerrantists do even though the context and the Hebrew do not require Noah’s flood to be global.¹⁷

J.I. Packer, a co-signer of the Chicago Statements, has warned against the abuse of these statements for just these reasons. About the mistaken use of modern inerrancy he observed:

And one can see how the mistake happens: people feel, sincerely if confusedly, that the only natural, straightforward way to express their certainty that the contents of Scripture are contemporary in their application is to treat Scripture as contemporary in its literary form. So, for example, Genesis 1 is read as if it were answering the same questions as today’s scientific textbooks aim to answer, and Genesis 2 and 3 are read as if they were at every point prosaic eyewitness narratives of what we would have seen if we had been there, ignoring the reasons for thinking that in these chapters ‘real events may be recorded in a highly symbolic manner,’⁽³¹⁾ and books like Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation are expounded in total disregard of the imaginative conventions of apocalyptic. But it does not follow

¹⁴Trimp, C. *Om de Klarheid der Waarheid* (Groningen: De Vuurbaak, 1967); Trimp, C. *Betwist Schriftgezag* (Groningen: De Vuurbaak, 1970).

¹⁵Trimp, “Amerikaans Fundamentalisme,” 21-45.

¹⁶Maier, Gerhard. *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books. 1994), 364.

¹⁷Kamphuis, J. “Schriftuurlijke Wetenschapsbeoefening,” *De Reformatie* 45 (30): 238-39 (1970); Poythress, Vern. *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 124-130.

that because Scripture records matters of fact, therefore it does so in what we should call matter-of-fact language.¹⁸

The inerrancy of Scripture throughout the ages meant and continues to mean that Scripture is true because its Author is truthful and trustworthy. This was understood to apply not only to ‘faith and morals’, but also to ‘nature and history.’ However, original inerrancy has never meant that Scripture was concerned with natural phenomena and historical events in the same way as scholars have explored the world since the Middle Ages, if only because there was no modern science before modernity. Original inerrancy did mean that God allowed the limitations of the human author to shape the revelation. But this never meant that the Bible could not be trusted or was not truthful. Let me repeat the example of God saying to Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ... On what were its footings set? Or who laid its cornerstone?” (Job 38:4-6, see also: 1 Sam. 2:8; Ps. 75:3; Ps. 104:5). The idea that the earth was founded on pillars is an ancient near eastern notion. If this notion were taken to aim at satisfying modern standards of scientific truth it would be wrong. But its purpose is not to convey inerrant information about the physical stability of the planet earth, but to provide an inerrant reminder that God sustains and preserves the world. When God reminds Job of this, He accommodates himself to Job’s understanding of the world. In contrast, rationalistic inerrantists treat Scripture in such a way that its religious truth depends on satisfying the requirements for good scholarship at a particular time. That is, rationalistic inerrantists view Scripture as a source book for scholarly information. Thus the difference between rationalistic and original inerrancy is important because they imply different views of Scripture.

Part of the reason why rationalistic inerrantists produce false dilemmas is that they read Scripture with a modern mindset. In doing so they read the concerns of contemporary science into Scripture and then declare the resultant interpretation as inerrant. This happens, for instance, to those who claim that Noah’s flood was global. In reading the expression “over the whole earth” as encompassing the entire globe as we know it they bring a modern Western prejudice to the text. Would God have used this prejudice to write this story for people in all times and at all places? Of course not. They also ignore that the Hebrew for the expression “upon the face of all the earth” can mean a geographically limited area.¹⁹ Thus “The Bible does not say one way or the other whether the waters covered the whole globe or only an extensive area in the ancient Near East – enough to wipe out all the human beings, who in Noah’s time had not yet spread out over all the earth (Gen. 11:8-9).”²⁰

Distortions of inerrancy of this kind are expressed in well-known claims such as “If the Bible is literally true and inerrant then the earth must be young and radiometric methods of determining age must be false.” Or, “If the Bible is literally true and inerrant then evolutionary theory must be false, regardless of the abundant evidence that supports it.”²¹ In such cases the Bible is reduced to a mere handbook of science in the same way as it is reduced to a handbook for the prediction of the future as in Dispensationalism and, thereby, the intention of its Author is distorted. In contrast, original inerrancy does not entail such claims. This is clear from the fact that “Warfield, the biblical inerrantist par excellence, came to conclusions opposite from Whitcomb and Morris on questions of science [This] must mean that it is anything but a simple,

¹⁸Packer, J.I. “Encountering Present-Day Views of Scripture,” In: J. Montgomery Boice, ed., *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (London & Glasgow: Pickering & Inglis, 1979), 61-82, see p. 78.

¹⁹Kamphuis, “Schriftuurlijke Wetenschapsbeoefening,” 238-39.

²⁰Kamphuis, “Schriftuurlijke Wetenschapsbeoefening,” 238-39; Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, 124-130.

²¹Daniel Fairbanks. *Relics of Eden: The powerful evidence of evolution in human DNA* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), 162.

commonsensical, or intuitive procedure to move from a belief in biblical inerrancy to conclusions about any specific areas of science – including the conclusions of creation science.”²² Warfield was an original inerrantist.

The tragic irony of the reaction by North American fundamentalism against the rationalism of higher biblical criticism is that the fundamentalists adopted the standards of scholarship of the Bible critics. To be sure, these fundamentalists did not adopt the philosophical naturalism and historicism of the higher biblical critics. But they did adopt the critics’ idea that the Bible must satisfy the standards of modern scholarship. The only difference between them was that the critics judged that Scripture failed this test whereas the fundamentalists insisted it passed. This created a shared platform for discussion in which both parties had an unspoken agreement to reduce the Bible to a collection of theological propositions that had to be logically consistent, that is, without contradiction. This view of Scripture caused people to ask the wrong questions and thereby created false dilemmas.

As an example of such a false dilemma I refer to the so-called ‘conflicts’ between the Gospels. For instance, Matthew tells us that when Jesus was tempted, the devil first asked him to turn stones into bread, then to throw himself off the temple, and finally to worship the devil (Matthew 4:1-11). In contrast, Luke has a different sequence: (1) turn stones into bread, (2) worship the devil, (3) throw yourself off the temple. On the rationalist view of inerrancy the intent of the human authors was to report the temptations in the correct chronological order. It then follows that the sequences contradict each other. But the assumption that the text was intended as accurate chronological reports is wrong because it imposes a modern scientific frame of mind on the text. This induces people to ask the wrong questions of the text such as the question about the sequence of events. In contrast, if Matthew and Luke are taken in context, one sees that it was the Spirit who led Jesus into the desert, as also Israel had been led into the desert and tested there. This involvement of the Spirit means that Jesus’ temptation was part of God’s plan and that its occurrence reveals to us that a giant step in God’s plan of redemption had taken place when Jesus defeated Satan. Then the chronological order is irrelevant, and the notion of a contradiction is not even on the radar.

There are more examples of the Gospel writers taking what we would see as liberties with the facts, but that would have been inconsequential for the writers themselves. The resulting differences can be understood when one sees the Gospels as four stories told by four different authors each with his own focus on the same message. Their concern was not with scholarly precision. Their message was conveyed in stories of events that actually occurred, but without concern to render those events in ways that would satisfy modern standards of scholarly reporting. In this view, the so-called contradictions are not contradictions. Rather, they exemplify the common human experience that different people will narrate the same event in different ways, especially if these people want to make different points. Just ask ten people to summarize the sermon they just heard and you will get ten different summaries. A rationalistic approach imposes contradictions of its own making and, thereby brings the trustworthiness of God’s word in disrepute.

Other false dilemmas are found in the so-called ‘conflicts’ between Bible and science. For example, if you take a twentieth-century scientific concern for precise reporting of temporal sequences to the reading of Genesis 1, you will note that the sequence of events in the so-called first creation story is plants, animals, and people (Gen. 1:1-2:3). In the second creation story it is: people, plants, animals (Gen. 2:4-25). Now, if you read these texts as a homogeneous and logically consistent system of propositions, then you have a contradiction between the two narratives. You are forced to ask which story is true, or to attempt specious interpretations. But since the Bible is inerrant you cannot reject either the one or the other story. Such

²²Noll, *Scandal*, 207.

dilemmas have led people to reject the Bible as a whole because the apparent discrepancies cannot be resolved given the critics' rationalistic assumptions and scientific concerns. One well-known alternative is to take the second creation story as a close-up of the first. Then the contradiction disappears and we recognize that it arose from asking the wrong question. The question is wrong because it issued from a rationalistic view of Scripture which shaped rationalistic assumptions about the text. A more extensive description of the features of this distortion of inerrancy may be found in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* by Mark Noll.²³ Among other things he notes the problematic habit of selecting verses from throughout the Scriptures to extract a particular truth without regard to context.

The rationalistic abuse of inerrancy has invited rejection of inerrancy. Sometime this rejection is based on confusion. I include one example as a caution against confusing rationalistic and original inerrancy. James Orr defines inerrancy as "hard and fast literality in minute matters of historical, geographical, and scientific detail."²⁴ Like many, he mistakes the rationalistic abuse of inerrancy for original inerrancy. Frame identifies the distortion of original inerrancy by Orr:

Well, if 'inerrancy' requires literalism, then we should renounce inerrancy; for the Bible is not always to be interpreted literally. Certainly there are important questions of Bible interpretation that one bypasses if he accepts biblical inerrancy in this sense. But we should remember that Orr's use of the term, and the similar uses of contemporary theologians, are distortions of its meaning. Perhaps those distortions have become so frequent today as to inhibit the usefulness of the term. For the time being, however, I would like to keep the term, and explain to people who question me that I am not using it in Orr's sense, but rather to confess the historic faith of the church.²⁵

John Frame rejects rationalistic inerrancy, but retains original inerrancy. Orr rejects both because he does not distinguish them.

Despite distortions of original inerrancy, a number of theologians including John Frame, Vern Poythress, Kevin Vanhoozer, J. van Genderen, W. H. Velema, Willem Ouweneel and Michael Horton have argued for maintaining the notion of inerrancy in its original sense. John Frame writes:

We do have a problem here: Other things being equal, I would prefer to drop all extra-scriptural terms including "infallible" and "inerrant" and simply speak, as Scripture does, of God's Word being true. That's all we mean, after all, when we say Scripture is inerrant. But modern theologians won't let me do that. They redefine "truth" so that it refers to some big theological notion, and they will not permit me to use it as meaning "correctness" or "accuracy" or "reliability." So I try the word "infallible," a historical expression which, as I indicated in a footnote above, is actually a stronger term than "inerrancy." But again, modern theologians insist on redefining that word also, so that it actually says less than "inerrancy."

Now what is our alternative? Even "accuracy" and "reliability" have been distorted by theological pre-emption. "Correctness" seems too trivial to express what we want to say. So, although the term is overly technical and subject to some misunderstanding, I intend to keep the word "inerrant" as a description of God's Word, and I hope that my readers will do the same. The idea, of course, is more important than the word. If I can find better language that expresses the biblical doctrine to modern hearers, I will be happy to use that and drop "inerrancy." But at this moment, "inerrancy" has no adequate replacement. To drop the term in the present situation, then, can involve compromising the

²³Noll, *Scandal*, 133-37, 188-208.

²⁴Orr, James. *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Scribner's, 1910, repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 199.

²⁵Frame, John, www.frame-poythress.org/is-the-bible-inerrant accessed March 19, 2013. This is one of the best and shortest introductions to the issue of the inerrancy of Scripture.

doctrine, and that we dare not do. God will not accept or tolerate negative human judgments concerning his holy Word. So I conclude: yes, the Bible is inerrant.²⁶

Van Genderen and Velema also want to maintain original inerrantism. They use the term inerrant in connection with Article 5 of the Belgic Confession. But they acknowledge that there is a problem in that “Fundamentalism has frequently come to describe a view in which the Bible is interpreted as literally as possible. . . . A second element [of Fundamentalism] is the conviction that the Bible does not contain any errors. This is referred to as inerrancy. As presented by H. Lindsell and others, inerrancy has become something spasmodic. To be the reliable Word of God and the inerrant rule for faith and life (cf. Belgic Confession of Faith, article 5), the revelation that God gave to us by means of human beings, the Bible does not need to be free of all unevenness. W.J. Ouwenel said: ‘To the Christian the reliability of Scripture is not a matter of logic and theory, but a matter of faithful confidence through which he relies on the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit.’ The Word never misleads us!”²⁷

6. Inerrancy and the Federation of Canadian and American Reformed Churches

Canadian Reformed people have a reason to feel uneasy about inerrancy, but this is not motivated by “a latitudinarian impulse that wants to make or maintain room for controversial views,” as Bredenhof suggested. It is difficult to see how infallibility would offer more latitude in Scripture interpretation than inerrancy. John Frame even argued that ‘infallible’ is a *stronger* term than ‘inerrant.’ Inerrant means there are no errors; infallible means there *can be* no errors.²⁸ The real reason for unease about inerrancy lies in the abuse of inerrancy. This abuse consists, as I have shown, in making the interpretation of Scripture subject to human reason. The feeling of discomfort among us is acute because this abuse has entered the Canadian Reformed churches. Here are some examples.

First, Rev. Bredenhof cites article 5 of the Belgic Confession as reading:

No one can make an accusation of contradiction or error. Article 5 states that ‘we believe without any doubt all things contained in them.’ No exceptions are made — if God says it, we accept it as the word of our Father who will never lie. To pit Scripture’s sufficiency in matters of salvation or doctrine against Scripture’s truthfulness in other matters is a false dilemma unknown to the Belgic Confession. The traditional Reformed doctrine of Scripture has always assumed at least an incipient form of inerrancy.²⁹

But Bredenhof’s quotation of article 5 is preceded in the Belgic Confession by the assertion that “We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, *for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith*” (my italics). The regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith is the purpose of our believing “without any doubt all things contained in them.” Article 5 BC has been quoted out of context by Bredenhof in such a way as to leave open what “all things contained in them” might mean. Without the understanding that “We

²⁶Frame, John, www.frame-poythress.org/is-the-bible-inerrant accessed March 19, 2013. See also: Poythress, Vern S. *Inerrancy and Worldview* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2012), 13-14; Poythress, Vern S. *Inerrancy and the Gospels* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2012), 182-184; Vanhoozer, Kevin. “The inerrancy of Scripture,” accessed March 19, 2013 at www.theologynetwork.org/christian-beliefs/the-bible/getting-stuck-in/the-inerrancy-of-scripture.htm; Horton, Michael. *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 181-84.

²⁷J. van Genderen and W.H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Gerrit Bilkes and Ed M. van der Maas (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 89-90.

²⁸For an explanation, see Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2010), 169.

²⁹Bredenhof, “Inerrancy,” Part 2 of 6, *Clarion*, March 12 (2009), no. 6, pp. 142f.

receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith,” anyone can read anything into the text and claim the authority of Scripture for it. Article 7 BC makes it clear that this is not what is intended: “We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe *in order to be saved* is sufficiently taught therein” (my italics).

Secondly, note the generic use of the notion of error by Bredenhof. Without further qualification this generic use suggests that the Bible is without error in all possible respects. This strategy opens the door to conflicts with other domains of knowledge. For example, as I already indicated, the mustard seed is not the smallest seed. But when Jesus said that it was the smallest of all seeds, he was teaching about the kingdom of heaven, not horticulture. Whether people at the time actually believed the mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds or understood it to be a figure of speech appropriate for a parable makes no difference. In either case, Jesus did not fail to make his point about the kingdom of heaven. Scripture could be said to be in error only if the interpreter made use of a generic notion of error and assumed that Jesus meant to convey information about the size of mustard seed.

Perhaps the generic use of the notion of error was a slip of the pen. It happens to the best of us. In reality Bredenhof may have a defined and specific meaning in mind when thinking of inerrancy. After all, in part 1 he offered Young’s definition of inerrancy as being incapable of error and perfectly true:

By this word [inerrant] we mean that the Scriptures possess the quality of freedom from error. They are exempt from the liability to mistake, incapable of error. In all their teachings they are in perfect accord with the truth.

This is an excellent definition that refers to original inerrancy. If this is what Bredenhof meant, then we are on the same page. But what Bredenhof really meant by inerrancy becomes clear in parts 3 and 4 of his articles in *Clarion* (2009). In part 3 he addresses the views of Dr. Arnold De Graaff in connection with a Psalm that remains unmentioned. Bredenhof writes: “According to De Graaff, the Psalmist intended ‘to preach, and not first of all to relate historical events. Generalizing, we can say that we cannot deduce a history of Israel from the O.T., just as little as we can reconstruct the life of Jesus from the Gospels.’ In other words, (Bredenhof adds) disregard history, and concentrate on the message. He (De Graaff) went on to insist that the creation account in Genesis is not to be taken as literally true. He explained further,

This does not imply that Genesis is irrelevant for geology or biology, on the contrary, in a very special way the creation story serves as the religious basis and directive for the Christian biologist’s and geologist’s theorizing. It does mean that the references to God’s creating do not answer our scientific, biological or geological questions, just as little as the Bible answers the questions of the historian or the anthropologist. The Bible is just not that kind of a book. It is not a textbook for any science, not even theology! The Scriptures ‘only’ intend to recite God’s mighty acts in Jesus Christ through Whom he created and re-created his world. And this recital is inscripturated for our edification, in order that we might take it to heart and thus find eternal life. That is how the Scriptures want to be read.³⁰

To be sure, De Graaff’s assertion “that the creation account in Genesis is not to be taken as literally true,” is confusing at best. But my point is that Bredenhof rejects De Graaff’s view that Scripture does not answer specific scholarly questions. Thereby, Bredenhof appears to assert that the Bible teaches science in a way that satisfies scholarly requirements – the rationalist distortion of inerrancy.

In part 4, Bredenhof raises the issue of biological death before the Fall.³¹ For Bredenhof, accepting biological death before the Fall implies a rejection of inerrancy. Scripture, however, gives no indication that the order of creation was altered fundamentally so as to introduce biological death for animals and plants as a consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve. Scripture does do that for Adam and Eve. Their punishment has

³⁰Bredenhof, “Inerrancy,” Part 3 of 6, *Clarion*, March 26 (2009), no. 7, pp. 173f.

³¹Bredenhof, “Inerrancy,” Part 4 of 6, *Clarion*, April 9 (2009), no. 8, pp. 202f.

been understood as spiritual death followed by the introduction of biological death for the first time. But their biological death has also been understood as a change in a pre-existing ‘mortality’ by Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Greijdanus, Bavinck and Schilder. They accepted the pre-Fall ‘mortality’ of Adam and Eve and the possibility of what Greijdanus called a perforation death as a peaceful transition from a ‘mortal’ earthly life to an immortal heavenly existence. They did so not for scientific reasons, but on scriptural grounds.³² This pre-fall ‘mortality’ belonged to God’s good creation. It was so unlike post-fall mortality that one could say that there was no (post-fall) mortality before the fall. Greijdanus or Schilder could have had it wrong of course. But the point is that Bredenhof takes Scripture to teach as a scientific fact that there was no biological death before the Fall.

Further confirmation to that effect may be found in Bredenhof’s position statements on creation and evolution. There, inerrancy means that “When the results of science and the clear teaching of Scripture appear to conflict, the Christian scientist is called to submit to what Scripture says and modify his scientific theories accordingly.” Inerrancy also means that the door should not be left “open for seeing the earth as millions or billions of years old rather than thousands or tens of thousands.”³³

In sum, Bredenhof holds that Scripture answers specific scholarly questions. He also holds that Scripture rejects biological death before the Fall and further that Scripture prescribes the content of (some) scientific theories. Thereby, Bredenhof gives the strong impression that the Bible teaches science in a way that satisfies scholarly requirements – the rationalist distortion of inerrancy. To be sure, if asked Bredenhof would affirm that “We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, *for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith*” (my italics). But in his *Clarion* essay he left open what the Belgic Confession might mean with the expression ‘all things contained in them.’ This allowed him to add that he receives Scripture for the teaching of science according to the standards of modern scholarship, and that he thinks others should do likewise. If they refuse, he accuses them of violating the inerrancy of Scripture, an accusation that is possible only because Bredenhof fails to distinguish between original and distorted inerrancy. Thus, Bredenhof upholds the rationalistic view of inerrancy.

Bredenhof is not alone in attempting to resolve perceived conflicts between science and Scripture by suggesting that science needs to be reconstructed in the light of Scripture because God does not make errors (generic sense). For instance, John Byl wrote in *Reformed Academic*:

4. I maintain that a genuinely Reformed epistemology should conform to the Reformed confessions. The Belgic Confession affirms that the Bible is the Word of God (Art. 3) and, hence, inerrant and fully authoritative (“believing without doubt all things contained in them,” Art. 5). It allows for revelation through nature but this knowledge (1) concerns God’s attributes and (2) is less clear and full than Biblical revelation (Art. 2). Furthermore, since scientific theories are human constructs, they must bow before Scripture (Art. 7). A Reformed epistemology should thus judge scientific theories in the light of Scripture.³⁴

³²Augustine, *On the Merits*, 1.2; *City of God*, 13:1; *Enchiridion*, 104; Aquinas, *Summa*, Pt. 1, Q. 98, art. 1; John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* 2: 16 & 3: 19; Greijdanus, S. “In Eden’s Hof,” *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* vol. 17, no. 7 (1916), 237-254, see pp. 252ff.; Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 573; Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 182; Schilder, Klaas. *Heidelbergse Catechismus* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1950), III, 383-388; Collins, C. John. *Science and faith: friends or foes?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 161, see also Collins, C. John. *Genesis 1-4: a linguistic, literary, and theological commentary* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing Company), 2006, 161, 162.

³³Bredenhof, Wes. “Position Statements on Creation and Evolution,” Dec. 13, 2012 accessed March 19, 2013 at yinkahdinay.wordpress.com/2012/12/13/position-statements-on-creation-and-evolution.

³⁴Response by John Byl (12 June 2009) to Arnold Sikkema: “Replacing Fictionalism and Antirealism with Humble

Byl makes two revealing rhetorical moves in this quotation. First, he cites article 5 of the Belgic Confession out of context in exactly the same way as Bredenhof does. Both of them ignore that we receive Scripture as holy and canonical “for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.” (Art. 5) and “that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein.” (Art. 7). Like Bredenhof, Byl takes the expression ‘all things contained in them’ to include that Scripture teaches of science according to the standards of modern scholarship. He has developed what he takes Scripture to teach about astronomy and cosmology in a book.³⁵ Clearly, Byl is distorting the original inerrancy of Scripture in the same way as modern rationalist inerrantists do.

Next, Byl assumes that whereas scientific theories are human constructs, the human interpretation of texts (Scripture) is not a human construct. These two moves are designed to shield his views from being questioned. This is an example of a rationalistic notion of inerrancy that is very different from the one intended in the Belgic Confession, which refers to original inerrancy.

These examples highlight the need for the advice of Dr. Scott Clark contained in the citation in the article by Bredenhof: “In fact, it is not a belief that the Bible is true which makes one a fundamentalist; rather it is the belief that one’s interpretation of Scripture is inerrant which qualifies one as a fundamentalist.”³⁶ Clark offers a diagnosis of the problem exemplified by Byl and Bredenhof who do not distinguish their fallible interpretations of Scripture from the inerrancy of Scripture itself.

7. Conclusion

Warfield (1851-1921), the modern spokesman for original inerrancy, did not approve of the way inerrancy acquired a different meaning in the hands of rationalists among evangelicals. More recently, reformed theologians and historians in Germany, The Netherlands and N. America have noted the shift in meaning suffered by the original notion of inerrancy. Rationalist inerrantism must be rejected because it has fallen victim to the assumptions of higher biblical criticism. If this sounds contradictory, consider that people in our era are influenced by the notion that the only knowledge worth having is scientific knowledge. To be sure, scientific knowledge is of great value in explaining the material aspects of this world. But there are many things science cannot explain such as laws for proper reasoning, morality and religion. Science cannot even explain itself because science requires proper reasoning and honesty. To deny these limitations of science is to overestimate the capacities of science and to fall into the trap of scientism. These overblown expectations of scientific knowledge started centuries ago. It has been one of the major forces propelling higher biblical criticism. Its practitioners applied the ideal of scientific knowledge to the Bible. Whatever was asserted in Scripture had to satisfy the demands of scholarly research of nature and history. I see Bultmann and Kuitert – the two theologians with whom we were associated by Bredenhof – as victims of this scientism.³⁷ Nothing much that Christians believed essential was left. Christians were alarmed, understandably. In North America many responded by arguing that Scripture is reliable when it makes assertions about nature and history. Unfortunately, they failed to see that they had adopted the rationalist arsenal of their opponents. When it

Realism” (*Reformed Academic*, 11 May 2009).

³⁵Byl, John. *God and Cosmos: A Christian View of Time, Space, and the Universe* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001).

³⁶Bredenhof, “Inerrancy,” Part 2 of 6, *Clarion*, March 12 (2009), no. 6, pp. 142f.

³⁷van der Meer, J.M. “Interpreting Nature and Scripture: A New Proposal for their Interaction.” In: *Christianity and the Human Body: A Theology of the Human Body*. eds. Robert Brungs, SJ and Marianne Postiglione, RSM, (The ITEST Faith/Science Press: St. Louis, Missouri. 2001), 38-72.

comes to historicity one can go wrong in two opposite directions which start from the same platform of rationalism. Rationalism takes the text as history without error *in the scholarly sense*. This forces one either to take every text as history without error in the scholarly sense (as rationalistic inerrantists do) or to reject every text as true history in the scholarly sense and to attach a symbolic meaning to it (as higher biblical critics do). Bredenhof mistakes the inerrantism of modern Christian rationalists for original inerrantism. A better strategy for defending the truthfulness of Scripture is, on the one hand, to understand and respect the limitations of scientific knowledge and, on the other hand, to trust the Author of the Bible rather than to trust human reason. In sum, keep distance from scientism and stay clear of biblicism.

Trusting the divine author of Scripture is of course merely the very first step in defending the truthfulness of Scripture. On pain of sounding trivial and with apologies to the theologians among my readers, I will add a few more elementary steps. Another step is improving clarity in discussions of whether the Bible contains errors by avoiding the generic use of the notion of error as we find it in the Chicago Statements and in Bredenhof's articles. The generic use of error lumps together errors according to the standards of divine revelation and perceived errors according to standards of modern scholarship. Instead one must discern what meaning God intended in a particular text in its particular context. God's meaning will reveal perceived errors to be illusions as my examples of the mustard seed and the earth's pillars show. It is only to God's meaning that we can attribute inerrancy, infallibility, truthfulness and trustworthiness.

In order to find God's meaning we must avoid the mistake of attributing error to Scripture. One contribution in that direction would be to distinguish *properly* between the message (content) and its context (form).³⁸ The first recipients of God's revelation lived in a particular context. God used that ancient context to reveal himself. While that context is long outdated, the message God conveyed using that context is not. Scripture contains errors only if one does not distinguish the message from the context as shown in the examples of the mustard seed (Section 2) and the pillars on which the earth is founded (Sections 2 and 5). Unfortunately, this distinction or a similar one has been abused by Bultmann and Kuitert to deny the meaning of Scripture. Bredenhof declares those who insist on *properly* distinguishing between the message and the context guilty by associating them with some of the bad boys in theology.³⁹ But as everyone knows, one should not throw out the baby with the bath water. The proper response to abuse of a good distinction is to throw out the abuse, not the good distinction. That said, I can only mark the need for this distinction here. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Another contribution to finding what God meant in a particular text is to avoid reading things into Scripture that are not there, but are derived from the culture in which one lives and has been brought up. In the history of Scripture interpretation there has been no period in which believers have not read their own understanding of the world into the text. This applies also to us. But when we enter the world we enter an already existing network of pre-existing understandings. These we absorb as part of our upbringing and education and we read them into Scripture. Our calling, I believe, is to distinguish the point of view of the human interpreter from the intent of the divine Author. Inerrancy in the proper sense applies to the intent of the divine Author, not to human interpretations of the text of Scripture. At the deepest level, therefore, our calling is to place our confidence in the Spirit, not in human reason. The inspiration of Scripture must not be made to depend on rationalistic support for inerrancy. Rather, inerrancy must depend on inspiration.

Finally, reading contemporary scholarly concerns into the Bible is just one example of the broader problem

³⁸For an example of a *proper* distinction between content and form, see: Greijdanus, S. *Schriftbeginselen ter Schriftverklaring* (Kampen: Kok, 1946), 127.

³⁹Bredenhof, "Inerrancy," *Clarion*, Part 3, March 26 (2009), no. 7, pp. 173f.; Part 5, May 7 (2009), no. 10, pp. 256f.

just identified. Rationalistic inerrantists read modern notions of history and nature into the Bible. They act as if the divine Author of the Bible intended to satisfy the demands of the modern scholarly study of nature and history. Rationalistic inerrantists, therefore, have a different view of Scripture than original inerrantists. Original inerrancy or infallibility is a characterization of the intent of the Author. In contrast, rationalist inerrancy is a characterization of the work of interpreters. Thus understood, original inerrancy fully acknowledges that Scripture (1) has a character that is both divine and human, (2) contains “all that man must believe in order to be saved,” and (3) is not intended to satisfy all human interests. Rationalist inerrancy must be firmly rejected because it fails on all three counts.

Can inerrancy be saved from its rationalistic distortions? J.I. Packer made an attempt in that direction by distinguishing between the mistaken use of inerrancy and the inerrancy he endorsed in the *Chicago Statements*.⁴⁰ This distinction assumes that the Chicago Statements themselves present the original understanding of inerrancy and that rationalistic inerrancy is an abuse of the latter. Clearly, in Packer’s view inerrancy refers to original inerrancy or infallibility. In this connection, he refers to the intent behind the Chicago Statements as articulated by Norman Geisler, a member of the committee that produced the 25 articles of the 1978 *Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, and General Editor for the conference. In his commentary on the articles, Norman Geisler writes: “regarding Article 20: ... What one learns from sources outside Scripture can occasion a reexamination and reinterpretation of Scripture. ... [but] the final authority for what the Bible teaches rests in the text of Scripture itself and not in anything outside it (except in God Himself). ...” Clearly, the intent of the Chicago Statements is in line with the original understanding of inerrancy. Insofar it succeeds it is also in line with the historic Reformation. The problem lies in the abuse of inerrancy. Unfortunately, this abuse already starts within the Chicago Statements themselves. As a result they have failed to convey their intentions clearly. So, where do we go from here?

From an historical point of view, the notions of infallibility and inerrancy are derived from that of the authority of Scripture which in turn is derived from that of the Author of Scripture. Since the Author of Scripture is trustworthy and speaks truth, therefore, Scripture is truthful and trustworthy. This is what I believe was originally meant by inerrancy. But, as we saw above, James Orr defines inerrancy as “hard and fast literalism in minute matters of historical, geographical, and scientific detail.”⁴¹ Like many, he mistakes the rationalistic abuse of inerrancy for original inerrancy. As John Frame pointed out, this rejection is problematic because it appears to react against a notion of error that originates in modern science and has been read into Scripture. This goes to show that we need to consider the influence of how the term error communicates in our culture. I am inclined to reject the term inerrancy because it has come to be associated with a modern mindset that places too much trust in reason and science and has moved away from the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit.

In theology the terms infallibility, inerrancy and truth have all been compromised one way or the other. From that perspective it is understandable why some theologians with a high view of Scripture such as John Frame prefer to keep using all three and define them clearly as referring to the truth of Scripture.⁴²

From the standpoint of current usage, a point in favour of returning to the original meaning of inerrancy is that the terms infallibility and inerrancy continue to be used as synonyms. Also, a terminological solution by

⁴⁰Packer, J.I. “Encountering Present-Day Views of Scripture,” In: J. Montgomery Boice, ed., *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (London & Glasgow: Pickering & Inglis, 1979), 61-82, see p. 78 (quoted above in section 5).

⁴¹Orr, James. *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Scribner’s, 1910, repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 199.

⁴²Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 167-176; Frame, www.frame-poythress.org/is-the-bible-inerrant accessed March 19, 2013.

rejecting inerrancy tends to draw the attention away from the real issue. The real issue is that Scripture must be interpreted on its own terms, that is, without reading things into it that were not intended by its Author. Ultimately at issue is the view of Scripture as God's Word for us – a view that is distorted whenever things are read into Scripture not intended by its Author. Provided this issue remains at the forefront of attention, there should be no objection to either term. However, I suspect that it is mainly among theologians that the term inerrancy is used as a synonym for infallibility.

From a pastoral point of view, I think the way forward ought to be determined by the needs of believers, particularly the need for clear communication and the need to build each other up in the faith. If we were to return to the original meaning of inerrancy we would have to make every effort to take distance from its abuses. This is difficult, as illustrated by Geisler, who failed to practice what he preached despite his best intentions. His failure points to the difficulty of extricating oneself from the scientific meaning the term error has in our culture. Returning to original inerrancy or maintaining it would include using a clear definition of its original meaning and alerting people to its abuses. This is a communications nightmare because in the controversy of the last decades inerrancy has received far too many definitions. Sticking with original inerrancy will require that the community be educated and agreed on its meaning. This includes the Canadian and American Reformed Churches which are apparently committed to inerrancy by virtue of membership in NAPARC. The question is what meaning of inerrancy we are committed to in that context?

So we have a choice. We can try to return to or maintain the original meaning of the term inerrancy or abandon it. As I see it this choice is a matter of strategy, not of principle provided we accept Scripture as truthful and trustworthy. My personal opinion is that the needs of the believers take precedence over those of the theologians and that the term inerrancy should be avoided because in our culture it communicates scholarly precision and makes Scripture interpretation too dependent upon reason. Even thoughtful people have been unable to extricate themselves from this distortion. Therefore, I think it is worth trying to distance ourselves from the abuses of inerrancy and stick with the terms truthfulness and trustworthiness of Scripture. As I see it, this will communicate clearly and in a simple way what is intended by the authority of Scripture because these terms point to the trustworthiness of its Author. It will contribute to building each other up in the faith because it will avoid bringing the discussion about inerrancy into the church where it will create unnecessary confusion. But I can live with maintaining inerrancy and defending its original sense even though that is a lot of perhaps unnecessary work as this essay illustrates.⁴³

⁴³I would like to thank those who reviewed this essay for their valuable comments.